

January 31, 2021

University of Utah, School of Music Review Committee

Re: Dr. Luke Dahn – Classroom Observation: reappointment to Assistant Professor (Lecturer)

Class: Theory III (MUSC 2110) – Zoom class

While I have had the pleasure to observe Dr. Dahn's teaching previously, this is the first time I have done so in an online – specifically synchronous – environment. Accordingly, I feel compelled to underscore that most of us in the theory area are accustomed to teaching in an in-person/on-campus setting, and we are still learning to be effective online instructors. I had an opportunity to observe a section of the Chromatic Harmony class taught by Dr. Dahn via Zoom. Before reviewing his teaching specifically, it is important to note that this particular class is perennially deemed the most difficult in the theory sequence by our students. Hence, an instructor needs a deft hand to make this material accessible to our students.

At the beginning of this lecture, Dr. Dahn began by sharing printed reactions to a reading from the textbook. This is a brilliant strategy to use in an IVC setting. Students are more reluctant to contribute in this setting, and by doing a screen share of printed reactions, it allows student to contribute in a non-threatening and yet meaningful way. The instructor toggled between the student questions submitted in advance and a scan of the musical examples in the textbook; in addition, he placed his computer on a keyboard so that he could play through the examples while he was talking/broadcasting. This is an excellent set up because it allows students to hear the examples being shown on the screen. If there is any drawback to the prepared questions, there were times it sounded like a radio program in which the announcer is responding to email questions by the listener. However, as time went on, more students felt empowered to chime in a verbalize supplemental questions (e.g., "I had a similar question, but I wanted to ask about...")

The topic of the day was the common-tone fully-diminished seventh chord (hereafter c.t. ^o7th). Dr. Dahn projected an example of the opening to Brahms Symphony No. 3. There was a c.t. ^o7th chord built on B natural that – in the opening – is used as a common-tone chord to prolong the tonic; however, Brahms uses it again later as an applied chord to the dominant. This was an excellent example for students to hear how the same chord can be used in two very distinct contexts: one as an agent of prolongation and the other as an agent of tonicization. He then introduced a second example taken from Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*. He is to be commended for using such diverse examples is important in broadening the canon and improving student experience and awareness of the music of composers of color. The third example was taken from Schumann's *Humoreske*, Op. 20.

After reviewing these well-chosen examples, he switched the screen to a view of a whiteboard that he could write on for the purpose of part writing. Dr. Dahn wrote out an example of a c.t. ^o7th chord that prolongs the dominant in the key of F. A student then asked if the root of the c.t. ^o7th chord was the common tone. Dr. Dahn quickly corrected this assumption that could have led to a misunderstanding and clarified that it was the root of the harmony being prolonged that was the common tone (C in this case as it is the root of the dominant harmony in F). He then went on to explain that – as the spelling of such c.t. ^o7th chords is often arbitrary – one must look instead at the harmony that comes before and after this chord and comprehend the intermediate chord in context. He handled this question superbly, and the student was much clearer on the progression under discussion. Indeed, when he said that the c.t. ^o7th chord was "rootless," I could hear the student acknowledge understanding.

Dahn is a consummate teacher who cultivates a collegial atmosphere in the classroom and provides a supportive environment for students to participate and to ask questions. In online learning, the trick is to find activities to foster active, rather than passive learning. The students perked up during the part writing. I think if he were to encourage to use the chat, rather than just unmuting, he might get some more responses from students. Again, it needs to be repeated that we all struggle with this issue in a Zoom class! In the IVC class I observed, many students were eager to engage in the class activity.

It is clear why students react so favorably to Dr. Dahn's teaching: he is patient, kind, discusses concepts clearly and – most importantly – empowers students to trust their own analytical instincts. We are very fortunate to have such a valuable teacher working with our students. At the opening of this letter, I articulated the challenge of teaching Chromatic Harmony, and Dr. Dahn has succeeded admirably!

Sincerely,

Michael Chikinda